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Mystery plane tied to Delaware firm

Summit Aviation's shadowy role traced

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A civilian airplane that crashed last month on what may have been a secret CIA mission to bomb Nicaragua's international airport was acquired by anti-Sandinista rebels through a Delaware aircraft outfitting company.

The firm, Summit Aviation Inc., on Delaware 896 near Middletown, is being scrutinized by U.S. Sen. Joseph R. Biden Jr., D-Del., a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Biden said Thursday that he had received an inquiry in June from a Delaware resident about allegedly secret aviation work being done by Summit. The senator expressed concern about the allegations relative to Reagan administration policy in Central America.

Neither Summit's president, Richard C. "Kip" du Pont of Greenville, nor other key company officers could be reached for comment, despite repeated calls to their homes and offices Thursday and today. Financial officer Edmund N. Conaway of Wayne, Pa., refused to speak to a reporter when contacted at home Thursday night.

Du Pont was reportedly "away, out flying," and a spokesman said he could not be contacted.

According to Federal Aviation Administration records and a Cessna dealer in Ohio, Summit bought the ill-fated aircraft in 1982.

Summit installed unspecified equipment, and then sold the plane to a Delaware corporation based in McLean, Va. — which transferred

it to Central America, the dealer and the FAA said.

Richard C. Wagner, of the Trager Aviation Center Inc. of Lima, Ohio, said Thursday that he recalls Summit officials telling him that they were going to sell the 10-seat, twin-engine 1981-model plane to "someone in England." Wagner said he sold the plane to Summit "for about \$390,000."

A News-Journal newspaper's investigation of Summit Aviation this summer has revealed a shadowy network of companies involved in Summit's refurbishing program, under a government contract about which Summit officials won't comment.

Of 10 multi-engine civilian aircraft reportedly equipped by Summit in the past year — some of them apparently with highly

sophisticated military electronics and surveillance equipment — six are untraceable through public FAA records.

The others were leased from separate companies in Virginia and North Carolina, whose officers confirmed their presence at Summit but weren't sure what the planes were being used for.

The plane that crashed in Managua last month was acquired from Summit by Investair Leasing Corp., which has links to the CIA, the New York Times reported Thursday.

Delaware corporation files show Investair Leasing Co. was formed July 28, 1982, by two women with Washington addresses. The Times reported that Investair's manager is a former top official of a company that was owned by the CIA.

The piston-driven Cessna crashed Sept. 8 during an abortive bombing run on Managua, according to the Times. The pilot — identified by the Nicaraguan government as an anti-

Sandinista rebel, according to the Times — was killed. The Nicaraguan government recovered the aircraft documents, subsequently traced to Summit.

A Nicaraguan official claimed that the plane was being used as part of a secret CIA operation, the Times reported.

The Reagan administration has aligned itself in Central America with El Salvador and Honduras, and opposes what it says is a movement toward international Communism by the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua — a movement supported, according to defectors, by the Soviet Union.

Congress has approved secret appropriations to the CIA to halt arms flows from Nicaragua to El Salvadoran guerillas. But Congress will not approve monies for the CIA to overthrow the Nicaraguan Sandinista government.

Sources in Nicaragua say, however, that the CIA is illegally trying to do just that — in part using planes like the Cessna 404 from Delaware that was downed while bombing Managua airport.

Biden — through his press secretary, Peter Smith — said Thursday that his staff is investigating allegations about Summit, which were contained in a letter his office received in June.

"It's no secret that I have been a persistent critic of the administration's policies in Central America," Biden said in a statement. But he said that, as a member of the intelligence committee, "by law, I am constrained from any public comment on this particular matter."

When asked about Summit's possible connection with the CIA, agency spokeswoman Kathryn Riedel said, "We don't talk about who we have contracts with... Write a letter." In written correspondence, CIA spokesman Larry R. Strawderman said, "It is CIA policy to neither confirm nor deny any confidential or covert relationship."